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S P E E C H  
OF  
SENATOR DOUGLAS,  
BEFORE THE  
LEGISLATURE OF ILLINOIS,  
APRIL 25, 1861,

*In compliance with a Joint Resolution of the two Houses.*

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The joint session of the Legislature having assembled in the hall of the House of Representatives, Senator Douglas, accompanied by several friends, entered at a quarter to eight. Mr. Speaker Cullom then introduced him to the Legislature.

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Mr. DOUGLAS said:

Mr. Speaker, and Gentlemen of the Senate and House of Representatives:

I am not insensible to the patriotic motives which have prompted you to do me the honor to invite me to address you on the momentous issues now presented in the condition of our country. With a heart filled with sadness and grief I proceed to comply with your request.

For the first time since the adoption of the Federal Constitution, a wide-spread conspiracy exists to destroy the best government the sun of heaven ever shed its rays upon. [Applause.] Hostile armies are now marching upon the Federal Capitol, with a view of planting a revolutionary flag upon its dome; seizing the national archives; taking captive the president elected by the votes of the people, and holding him in the hands of secessionists and disunionists. A war of aggression and of extermination is being waged against the government established by our fathers. The boast has gone forth by the authorities of this revolutionary government, that on the first day of May the revo-

lutionary flag shall float from the walls of the capitol at Washington, and that on the fourth day of July the rebel army shall hold possession of the Hall of Independence in Philadelphia.

The simple question presented to us is, whether we will wait for the enemy to carry out his boast of making war upon our soil; or whether we will rush as one man to the defense of the government and its capital, and defend it from the hands of all assailants who have threatened to destroy it. [Great enthusiasm.] Already the piratical flag has been unfurled against the commerce of the United States. Letters of marque have been issued, appealing to the pirates of the world to assemble under that revolutionary flag, and commit depredations on the commerce carried on under the stars and stripes. The navigation of our great river into the Gulf of Mexico is obstructed. Hostile batteries have been planted upon its banks; custom houses have already been established; and we are required now to pay tribute and taxes, without having a voice in making the laws imposing them, or having a share in the proceeds after they have been collected. The question is, whether this war of aggression shall proceed, and we remain with folded arms, inattentive spectators; or whether we shall meet the aggressors at the threshold and turn back the tide of revolution and usurpation.

So long as there was a hope of peaceful solution, I prayed and implored for compromise. I can appeal to my countrymen with confidence that I have spared no effort, omitted no opportunity, to secure a peaceful solution of all these troubles, and thus restore peace, happiness and fraternity to this country. When all propositions of peace fail, and a war of aggression is proclaimed, there is but one course left for the patriot, and that is to rally under that flag which has waved over the Capitol from the days of Washington, and around the government established by Washington, Madison, Hamilton, and their compeers. [Great cheering.]

What is the alleged cause for this invasion of the rights and authority of the government of the United States? The cause alleged is that the institutions of the Southern States are not safe under the Federal Government. What evidence has been presented that they are insecure? I appeal to every man within the sound of my voice to tell me at what period, from the time that Washington was inaugurated down to this hour, have the rights of the Southern States—the rights of the slaveholders—been more secure than they are at this moment? When in the whole history of this government have they stood on so firm a basis? For the first time in the history of this Republic, there is no restriction by act of Congress upon the institution of slavery, anywhere

within the limits of the United States. Then it cannot be the territorial question that has given them a cause for rebellion. When was the fugitive slave law executed with more fidelity than since the inauguration of the present incumbent of the presidential office? [Much applause.] Let the people of Chicago speak and tell us when were the laws of the land executed with as much firmness and fidelity, so far as the fugitive slaves are concerned, as they are now. Can any man tell me of any one act of aggression that has been committed or attempted since the last presidential election, that justifies this violent disruption of the Federal Union?

I ask you to reflect, and then point out any one act that has been done—any one duty that has been omitted to be done—of which any one of these disunionists can justly complain. Yet we are told, simply because a certain political party has succeeded in a presidential election, they choose to consider that their liberties are not safe, and therefore they are justified in breaking up the government!

I had supposed that it was a cardinal and fundamental principle of our system of government that the decision of the people at the ballot-box, without fraud, according to the forms of the Constitution, was to command the implicit obedience of every good citizen. [Loud applause.] If defeat at a presidential election is to justify the minority, or any portion of the minority, in raising the traitorous hand of rebellion against the constituted authorities, you will find the future history of the United States written in the history of Mexico. According to my reading of Mexican history, there has never been one presidential term, from the time of the revolution of 1820 down to this day, when the candidate elected by the people ever served his four years. In every instance, either the defeated candidate has seized upon the presidential chair by the use of the bayonet, or he has turned out the duly elected president before his term expired. Are we to inaugurate this Mexican system in the United States of America? [No! never!] Suppose the case to be reversed. Suppose the Disunion candidate had been elected by any means—I care not what, if by any means in accordance with the forms of the Constitution—at the last presidential election. Then, suppose the Republicans had raised a rebellion against his authority. In that case you would have found me tendering my best efforts and energies to John C. Breckinridge to put down the Republican rebels. [Tremendous applause.] And if you had attempted such a rebellion, I would have justified him in calling forth all the power and energies of this country to have crushed you out. [Continued applause.]

The first duty of an American citizen, or of a citizen of any constitutional government, is obedience to the constitution and laws of his country. [Applause.] I have no apprehension that any man in Illinois, or beyond the limits of our own beloved State, will misconstrue or misunderstand my motive. So far as any of the partisan questions are concerned, I stand in equal, irreconcilable and undying opposition both to the Republicans and the Secessionists. [Applause.] You all know that I am a very good partisan fighter in partisan times. [Laughter and cheers.] And I trust you will find me equally as good a patriot when the country is in danger. [Cheers.]

Now permit me to say to the assembled Representatives and Senators of our beloved State, composed of men of both political parties, in my opinion it is your duty to lay aside, for the time being, your party creeds and party platforms; to dispense with your party organizations and partisan appeals; to forget that you were ever divided, until you have rescued the government and the country from their assailants. When this paramount duty shall have been performed, it will be proper for each of us to resume our respective political positions, according to our convictions of public duty. [Applause.] Give me a country first, that my children may live in peace; then we will have a theatre for our party organizations to operate upon.

Are we to be called upon to fold our arms, allow the national capital to be seized by a military force under a foreign revolutionary flag; to see the archives of the government in the hands of a people who affect to despise the flag and government of the United States? I am not willing to be expelled by military force, nor to fly from the Federal Capital. It has been my daily avocation, six months in the year, for eighteen years, to walk into that marble building, and from its portico to survey a prosperous, happy and united country on both sides of the Potomac. I believe I may with confidence appeal to the people of every section of the country to bear testimony that I have been as thoroughly national in my political opinions and action as any man that has lived in my day. [Applause.] And I believe if I should make an appeal to the people of the State of Illinois, or of the Northern States, for their impartial verdict, they would say that whatever errors I have committed have been in leaning too far to the southern section of the Union against my own. [Applause.] I think I can appeal to friend and foe: I use the term in a political sense, and I trust I use the word foe in a *past* sense. [Much applause.] I can appeal to them with confidence, that I have never pandered to the prejudice or passion of my section against the minority section of this Union; and I will say

to you now, with all frankness and in all sincerity, that I will never sanction nor acquiesce in any warfare whatever upon the constitutional rights or domestic institutions of the people of the Southern States. [Applause.] On the contrary, if there was an attempt to invade those rights—to stir up servile insurrection among their people—I would rush to their rescue, and interpose with whatever of strength I might possess to defend them from such a calamity. [Applause.] While I will never invade them—while I will never fail to defend and protect their rights to the full extent that a fair and liberal construction of the Constitution can give them—they must distinctly understand that I will never acquiesce in their invasion of our constitutional rights.

It is a crime against the inalienable and indefeasible right of every American citizen to attempt to destroy the government under which we were born. It is a crime against constitutional freedom and the hopes of the friends of freedom throughout the wide world to attempt to blot out the United States from the map of Christendom. Yet this attempt is now being made. The government of our fathers is to be overthrown and destroyed. The capital that bears the name of the Father of his Country is to be bombarded, and leveled to the earth among the rubbish and the dust of things that are past. The records of your government are to be scattered to the four winds of heaven. The constituted authorities, placed there by the same high authority that placed Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison, and Jackson in the chair, are to be captured and carried off, to become a by-word and a scorn to the nations of the world. [Never! never!]

You may think that I am drawing a picture that is overwrought. No man who has spent the last week in the city of Washington will believe that I have done justice to it. You have all the elements of the French Revolution surrounding the capital now, and threatening it with its terrors. Not only is our constitutional government to be stricken down; not only is our flag to be blotted out; but the very foundations of social order are to be undermined and destroyed; the demon of destruction is to be let loose over the face of the land, a reign of terror and mob law is to prevail in each section of the Union, and the man who dares to plead for the cause of justice and moderation in either section is to be marked down as a traitor to his section. If this state of things is allowed to go on, how long before you will have the guillotine in active operation?

I appeal to you, my countrymen—men of all parties—not to allow your passions to get the better of your judgments. Do not allow your vengeance upon the authors of this great iniquity to lead you into rash,

and cruel, and desperate acts upon loyal citizens who may differ with you in opinion. Let the spirit of moderation and of justice prevail. You cannot expect, within so few weeks after an excited political canvass, that every man can rise to the high and patriotic level of forgetting his partisan prejudices and sacrifice everything upon the altar of his country; but allow me to say to you, whom I have opposed and warred against with an energy you will respect, allow me to say to you, you will not be true to your country if you ever attempt to manufacture partisan capital out of the misfortunes of your country. [Much applause.] When calling upon Democrats to rally to the tented field, leaving wife, child, father and mother behind them to rush to the rescue of the President that you elected, do not make war upon them and try to manufacture partisan capital at their expense out of a struggle in which they are engaged from the holiest and purest of motives. [Renewed applause.]

Then I appeal to you, my own Democratic friends—those men that have never failed to rally under the glorious banner of the country, whenever an enemy, at home or abroad, has dared to assail it—to you with whom it has always been my pride to act—do not allow the mortification, growing out of defeat in a partisan struggle, and the elevation of a party to power that we firmly believed to be dangerous to the country—do not let that convert you from patriots into traitors to your native land. [Long continued applause.] Whenever our government is assailed—when hostile armies are marching, under new and odious banners against the government of our country, the shortest way to peace is the most stupendous and unanimous preparation for war. [Tremendous applause.] The greater the unanimity the less blood will be shed. [Much applause.] The more prompt and energetic the movement and the more imposing in numbers, the shorter will be the struggle.

Every friend of freedom—every champion and advocate of constitutional liberty throughout the land must feel that this cause is his own. There is and should be nothing disagreeable or humiliating to men who have differed, in times of peace, on every question that could divide fellow-men, to rally in concert in defence of the country and against all assailants. While all the States of this Union, and every citizen of every State has a priceless legacy dependent upon the success of our efforts to maintain this government, we in the great valley of the Mississippi have peculiar interests and inducements to the struggle. What is the attempt now being made? Seven States of this Union chose to declare that they will no longer obey the constitution of the United States, that they will withdraw from the government established by our fathers; that they will dissolve, without our consent, the bonds

that have united us together. But, not content with that, they proceed to invade and obstruct our dearest and most inalienable rights, secured by the constitution. One of their first acts is to establish a battery of cannon upon the banks of the Mississippi, on the dividing line between the States of Mississippi and Tennessee, and require every steamer that passes down the river to come to under their guns to receive a custom house officer on board, to prescribe where the boat may land, and upon what terms it may put out a barrel of flour or a cask of bacon.

We are called upon to sanction this policy. Before consenting to their right to commit such acts, I implore you to consider that the same principle which will allow the cotton States to exclude us from the ports of the gulf, would authorize the New England States and New York and Pennsylvania to exclude us from the Atlantic, and the Pacific States to exclude us from the ports of that ocean. Whenever you sanction this doctrine of secession, you authorize the States bordering upon the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to withdraw from us, form alliances among themselves, and exclude us from the markets of the world and from communication with all the rest of Christendom. Not only this, but there follows a tariff on imports, levying taxes upon every pound of tea and coffee and sugar, and every yard of cloth that we may import for our consumption; the levying, too, of an export duty upon every bushel of corn and every pound of meat we may choose to send to the markets of the world to pay for our imports.

Bear in mind that these very cotton States, who in former times have been so boisterous in their demands for free trade, have, among their first acts, established an export duty on cotton for the first time in American history.

It is a historical fact, well known to every man who has read the debates of the Convention which framed the constitution, that the Southern States refused to become parties to the constitution unless there was an express provision in the constitution prohibiting Congress to levy an export duty on any product of the country. No sooner have these cotton States seceded than an export duty is levied; and if they will levy it on their own cotton do you not think they will levy it on our pork, and our beef, and our corn, and our wheat, and our manufactured articles and all we have to sell? Then what is the proposition? It is to enable the tier of States bordering on the Atlantic and the Pacific, and on the Gulf, surrounding us on all sides, to withdraw from our Union—form alliances among themselves and then levy taxes on us without our consent and collect revenue without giving us any just proportion or any portion of the amount collected. Can we submit to taxation without representation? [Several voices "no."] Can we permit nations foreign to us to collect revenues off our products—the fruits of our industry? I ask the citizens of Illinois—I ask every citizen in the great basin between the Rocky Mountains and the Alleghanies, in the valleys of the Ohio, Mississippi and Missouri to tell me whether he is willing to sanction a line of policy that may isolate us from the markets of the world and make us dependent provinces upon powers that thus choose to surround and hem us in? [Many voices "no," and "never."]

I warn you, my countrymen, whenever you permit this to be done in the Southern States, New York will very soon follow their example. New York—that great port, where two-thirds of all our revenue is collected, and whence two-thirds of our products are exported, will not long be able to resist the temptation of taxing fifteen millions of people in the great West when she can monopolize the resources and release her own people thereby from any taxation whatsoever. Hence I say to you, my countrymen, from the best consideration I have been able to give to this subject, after the most mature reflection and thorough investigation, I have arrived at the conclusion that, come what may, war, if it must be, although I deplore it as a great calamity, yet, come what may, the people of the Mississippi Valley can never consent to be excluded from free access to the ports of the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico. [Great applause.]

Hence, I repeat that while I am not prepared to take up arms or to sanction war upon the rights of the Southern States; upon their domestic institutions; upon their rights of person or property, but, on the contrary, would rush to their defense and protect them from assault, I will never cease to urge my countrymen to take up arms and to fight to the death in defense of our indefeasible rights. [Long continued applause.] Hence, if a war does come, it will be a war of self-defense on our part. It will be a war in defense of our own just rights; in defense of the government which we have inherited as a priceless legacy from our patriotic fathers; in defense of those great rights of the freedom of trade, commerce, transit and intercourse from the center to the circumference of our great continent. These are rights we can never surrender.

I have struggled almost against hope to avert the calamities of war and to effect a re-union and reconciliation with our brethren of the South. I yet hope it may be done, but I am not able to point out to you how it may be effected. Nothing short of Providence can reveal to us the issue of this great struggle. Bloody—calamitous—I fear it will be. May we so conduct it if a collision must come, that we will stand justified in the eyes of Him who knows our hearts, and who will judge our every act. We must not yield to resentments, nor to the spirit of vengeance, much less to the desire for conquest or ambition.

I see no path of ambition open in a bloody struggle for triumph over my own countrymen. There is no path for ambition open for me in a divided country, after having so long served a united and glorious country. Hence, whatever we may do must be the result of conviction, of patriotic duty—the duty that we owe to ourselves, to our posterity, and to the friends of constitutional liberty and self-government throughout the world. [Loud applause.]

My friends, I can say no more. To discuss these topics is the most painful duty of my life. It is with a sad heart—with a grief that I have never before experienced, that I have to contemplate this fearful struggle; but I believe in my conscience that it is a duty we owe ourselves and our children, and our God, to protect this Government and that flag from every assailant, be he who he may. [Tremendous and prolonged applause.]

On motion of Mr. Hacker, the House adjourned.